

# **Political Participation in the Twittersphere and the Nigerian 2015 and 2019 Presidential Elections: A Cultural Underpinning**

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the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

under the supervision of  
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## **CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP**

I certify that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy degree, in the School of Communication at the University of Technology Sydney.

I also certify that this thesis is wholly my work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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## **DEDICATION**

Dad. For holding my dreams in your heart and reminding me of them.

Mum. For always believing in me and teaching me to do the same.

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Thanks go to:

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP .....	i
DEDICATION .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES.....	x
GLOSSARY OF TERMS .....	xii
ABSTRACT .....	xiii
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background of the Study .....	1
1.2 Research Context .....	3
1.3 Research Problem .....	4
1.4 Nature of Enquiry .....	6
1.41 Aims and Objectives .....	6
1.42 Research Questions .....	7
1.5 Limitations and Delimitations .....	7
1.6 Justification.....	8
1.7 Contribution to Knowledge .....	8
1.8 A Grammar of Twitter .....	9
1.81 An Architecture of Twitter .....	9
1.82 A Language of Twitter Use .....	11
1.9 Thesis Outline.....	11
<b>CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND .....</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	13
2.2 Nigeria's Political Evolution and the Republics.....	13
2.21 The 1 <sup>st</sup> Republic.....	14
2.22 The 2nd Republic.....	14
2.23 The 3rd Republic .....	15
2.24 The 4th Republic.....	16
2.3 Nigeria's Media Evolution .....	17
2.4 Nigeria's Internet Evolution .....	18
2.5 Internet Penetration and Access in Nigeria .....	19

2.6	The Social Media Evolution.....	21
2.7	A Look at the Economy .....	22
2.8	Cultural Dynamics in the Nigerian Society.....	23
2.81	<i>Nigeria's Religious Character</i> .....	24
2.82	<i>Nigeria's Ethnic Character</i> .....	25
2.83	<i>Diversity: Pro or Con of Nigerian Society?</i> .....	28
2.84	<i>Religion, Ethnicity, and Political Dynamics in Nigeria</i> .....	28
2.9	The 2015 Elections and Underlying Issues .....	29
2.91	<i>Nigeria's Security Dilemma</i> .....	30
2.92	<i>Boko Haram: Insurgency in Northeast Nigeria</i> .....	31
2.93	<i>Nigeria's Corrupt Institutions</i> .....	33
2.94	<i>Nigeria's Dwindling Economy</i> .....	34
2.10	The 2019 Election.....	35
2.11	Summary .....	36
<b>CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>		<b>37</b>
3.1	Introduction .....	37
3.11	<i>Defining Social Media</i> .....	37
3.12	<i>What is Social about Social Media?</i> .....	38
3.2	Empirical Research on Democracy, Political Participation, and Social Media .....	39
3.21	<i>Western Cases of Democracy, Political Participation, and Social Media</i> .....	39
3.22	<i>Non-Western Cases of Democracy, Political Participation, and Social Media</i> ...	41
3.23	<i>Recap of Empirical Studies</i> .....	47
3.3	Critical Discourse on Social Media .....	48
3.31	<i>Social Media Impacts and Arguments</i> .....	48
3.32	<i>Social Movements</i> .....	55
3.33	<i>Social Media and Elections</i> .....	68
3.4	Cultural Discourse in Africa and African Politics .....	69
3.41	<i>Ethnicity and Religion in African Politics</i> .....	69
3.42	<i>De-Colonialised African Culture</i> .....	72
3.43	<i>African Elections and Ethno-Religious Conflicts</i> .....	72
3.44	<i>Cultural Influences on Media and Politics</i> .....	73
3.45	<i>Clientelism and Vote Buying: Cultural Practices in Emerging Democracies</i> .....	74
3.46	<i>Election Monitoring and Observation</i> .....	77
3.47	<i>Consolidating Cultural Perspectives on Social Media Discourse: The Views from Africa</i> .....	79

3.5	Summary .....	80
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - CONNECTIVE THEORIES</b>		<b>81</b>
4.1	Introduction .....	81
4.2	The Public Sphere.....	82
4.21	<i>Critiques of Exclusion in the Habermasian Public Sphere</i> .....	83
4.22	<i>Communicative Action in the Public Sphere</i> .....	86
4.23	<i>A Refined Public Sphere</i> .....	86
4.24	<i>Debating Social Media as a Public Sphere</i> .....	87
4.25	<i>Main Points: Theory I</i> .....	88
4.3	The Social Network Theory .....	89
4.31	<i>The Basis of the Social Network Concept</i> .....	90
4.32	<i>Positioning the Public Sphere Theory in the Social Network</i> .....	91
4.33	<i>Main Points: Theory II</i> .....	92
4.4	Communication Power Theory.....	93
4.41	<i>Power</i> .....	93
4.42	<i>Influence</i> .....	95
4.43	<i>Main Points: Theory III</i> .....	96
4.5	Summary .....	96
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY.....</b>		<b>98</b>
5.1	Introduction .....	98
5.2	Choosing a Methodology .....	99
5.21	<i>The Research Questions</i> .....	99
5.3	The Research Design .....	100
5.31	<i>Qualitative Research</i> .....	100
5.32	<i>Exploratory Case Study Design</i> .....	102
5.33	<i>Case Study: What is it?</i> .....	102
5.34	<i>The Argument</i> .....	109
5.4	Research Methods.....	109
5.41	<i>Ethnography</i> .....	109
5.42	<i>Netnography – Ethnography in the Digital Space</i> .....	110
5.43	<i>Connective Ethnography</i> .....	113
5.5	Sampling.....	116
5.51	<i>Sampling Strategy</i> .....	119
5.52	<i>Reflections on the Data</i> .....	124



5.6	The Data .....	125
5.61	<i>Data Collection Methods</i> .....	125
5.62	<i>Data Analysis: Methods</i> .....	129
5.7	Ethical Reflections .....	131
5.71	<i>Insider-Outsider Conflicts</i> .....	132
5.72	<i>Informed Consent</i> .....	133
5.73	<i>Written Consent</i> .....	134
5.74	<i>Researcher-Researched Power Relations</i> .....	136
5.75	<i>Research Beneficiaries</i> .....	137
5.8	Summary & Introduction to the Analyses and Discussion Chapters .....	137
<b>CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS OF TWITTER AS A POLITICAL CHANNEL.....</b>		<b>139</b>
6.1	Introduction .....	139
6.2	Online Data Extractions and Attributes .....	140
6.21	<i>2015 Election Campaign Season (November 2014 – March 2015)</i> .....	140
6.22	<i>Election Day (28 March 2015)</i> .....	144
6.23	<i>Pre-Election to Election Season 2019 (May 2018 to February 2019)</i> .....	145
6.24	<i>Election Day (23 February 2019)</i> .....	148
6.25	<i>Post-Election Day (24-26 February 2019)</i> .....	148
6.3	Interpreting Demographics .....	148
6.31	<i>Participant Demographics</i> .....	149
6.32	<i>Conclusion</i> .....	155
6.4	Perceptions of Social Media .....	156
6.41	<i>The Choice for Twitter</i> .....	156
6.42	<i>Influencing Public Opinion on Twitter</i> .....	158
6.43	<i>Welcoming the New: The Digital Public Sphere</i> .....	159
6.44	<i>Social Media: The Good and the Bad</i> .....	161
6.45	<i>Fake News and Counterbalancing Fake News</i> .....	161
6.46	<i>Perceptions of Social Media Use in Political Participation</i> .....	168
6.5	Role(s) of Social Media in Political Communication .....	170
6.51	<i>Accessibility and Accountability via Social Media</i> .....	170
6.52	<i>Election Monitoring and Observation with Social Media</i> .....	171
6.53	<i>Does Twitter Win Elections?</i> .....	172
6.54	<i>Political Engagement: The Role of Twitter in Elections</i> .....	180
6.6	Summary .....	181

<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL UNDERPINNINGS ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR.....</b>	<b>183</b>
7.1 Introduction .....	183
7.2 Culture in Non-Western Politics.....	186
7.21 <i>The Impact of Economic Dependency on Political Decisions</i> .....	187
7.22 <i>Power Influence in Lieu of Economic Dependency</i> .....	190
7.23 <i>Cultural Discourses on Twitter</i> .....	191
7.24 <i>The Culture of Elections</i> .....	191
7.25 <i>Communicating Economic and Political Power</i> .....	192
7.3 Culture and Social Media: Impacts, Circumventions, and Redefinitions .....	199
7.31 <i>The Cultural Impacts of Social Media</i> .....	199
7.32 <i>Circumventing Culture with Social Media</i> .....	203
7.33 <i>Demanding More from Governance</i> .....	206
7.4 Summary .....	206
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT: CONSOLIDATING THE STUDY.....</b>	<b>208</b>
8.1 Introduction .....	208
8.2 Power-Dependence Relationship.....	209
8.21 <i>Political Transactions: A Nigerian Perspective</i> .....	210
8.22 <i>Nigeria's Real Political Power Structure</i> .....	212
8.3 Nigeria's Digitised Public Sphere.....	214
8.31 <i>Participatory Democracy in Nigeria's Digital Public Sphere</i> .....	214
8.32 <i>Public Opinion in the Digital Public Sphere</i> .....	217
8.33 <i>Public Sphere, Not Echo Chamber</i> .....	218
8.4 Political Participation in the Age of Twitter.....	220
8.41 <i>Strengthening Participatory Democracy</i> .....	221
8.42 <i>Motives for Political Participation: Curing Political Apathy</i> .....	222
8.43 <i>When Online Political Participation does not Influence Offline Political Participation</i> .....	223
8.5 Information Duality on Twitter .....	225
8.51 <i>Social Media Scepticism</i> .....	226
8.6 Culture as an Intermediary in the Nigerian Twittersphere .....	227
8.7 Summary .....	228
<b>CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>230</b>
9.1 Introduction .....	230
9.2 Key Study Findings.....	232

9.3	Contributions of the Research .....	236
9.4	Suggestions for Future Research .....	237
9.5	Conclusion .....	238
REFERENCES.....		239
APPENDIX - SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWED QUESTIONS .....		277
Group 1: Twitter Influencers/Avid Users .....		277
Group 2: Other Participants .....		278

## LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

### List of Figures

Figure 2.1	Nigeria's democratic history in a snapshot.....	17
Figure 2.2	Recreated page of the first website created by Bernes-Lee in 1989 .....	19
Figure 2.3	Telephony Subscriber Teledensity .....	21
Figure 2.4	Africa's poverty position relative to the world as of April 2019 .....	22
Figure 2.5	Africa's poverty position relative to the world as of October 2019.....	23
Figure 2.6	Map of Nigeria showing its religious divide .....	25
Figure 2.7	Map of Nigeria showing its ethnic diversity.....	26
Figure 2.8	Michelle Obama & Malala Yousafzai join the #BringBackOurGirls campaign ...	33
Figure 3.1	Ranking - Most popular social networks: Facebook #1, Twitter, #12 .....	64
Figure 3.2	Number of national-level election missions per year from 1975 to 2004 .....	78
Figure 5.1	Mapping of ethnic and religious divides in Nigeria.....	118
Figure 5.2	Sample universe, inclusion/exclusion criteria and sample .....	119
Figure 5.3	Google Chrome N-Capture progress page.....	128
Figure 5.4	Twitter 15-minute restrictions message (magnified) .....	128
Figure 6.1	Al Jazeera tweet about the six-week election postponement in 2015 .....	141
Figure 6.2	Twitter comments about six-week election postponement in 2015 .....	142
Figure 6.3	Public opinion - election postponement was a win for the opposition.....	145
Figure 6.4	Historical voting patterns in Nigerian elections.....	149
Figure 6.5	Graph of ethnoreligious participant distribution.....	151
Figure 6.6	Twitter map on Election Day, 2019 .....	153
Figure 6.7	Calling out fake news on the net during the 2019 elections .....	162

Figure 6.8 Test every spirit - A call to verify before sharing, Election Day 2019 .....	163
Figure 6.9 Gubernatorial aspirant giving away cash and Ankara.....	164
Figure 6.10 Things are not always what they seem: Verifying social media news online ...	165
Figure 6.11 Following the trail to verify networked news .....	165
Figure 6.12 Internet user penetration in Nigeria from 2017 to 2023 .....	174
Figure 6.13 Internet user penetration in the United States from 2017 to 2023 .....	174
Figure 6.14 Active social network penetration in selected countries as of January 2020.....	175
Figure 6.15 Buhari in rural Nigeria – 2015 election campaign .....	178
Figure 6.16 Voters at a polling station in rural Nigeria .....	179
Figure 7.1 Politician sharing cheese balls during a campaign.....	194
Figure 7.2 Tweets by the PDP and APC – alleged vote buying arrest .....	195
Figure 7.3 PDP and APC called out on duplicity .....	196
Figure 7.4 Tweet: Disconnect between the political class and citizens .....	205
Figure 8.1 The power dynamism in Nigerian politics .....	213

## List of Tables

Table 1.1 Twitter Architectural Terms.....	11
Table 1.2 Twitter Language Terms.....	11
Table 3.1 Estimated proportion of direct vote buying by country.....	76

## **GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

<b>Terms</b>	<b>Meanings</b>
AG	Action Group
APC	All Progressive Party
DSS	Department of State Services
EiE	Enough is Enough
ELMO	Election Monitoring data collection and reporting system
GSM	Global System for Mobile
ICT	Information Communication Technology
INEC	Independent National Electoral Commission
MTN	Mobile Telephone Networks
NCNC	National Council of Nigerian Citizens
NPC	Northern People's Congress
PDP	People's Democratic Party
SMO	Social Movement Organisation
SSS	State Security Service
YIAGA	Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth & Advancement

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the ongoing debate about the use of social media as tools of participatory democracy and aims to provide a better understanding of their applicability within a distinctly African context. Specifically, it investigates the role of Twitter as a new tool of political participation in the Nigerian cultural context. It presents the argument that while social media are valuable tools of political participation, the culture in Nigeria's diverse society, including the culture of economic dependency, exerts as much – or more – influence on political participation among the country's citizens.

The study employed a connective ethnographic methodology, juxtaposing netnographic data collection on Twitter with offline interviews and observations of 24 participants, including seven key informants. This use of qualitative methods is significant because Twitter-based studies are predominantly quantitative. In a society imbued with culture such as Nigeria's, a qualitative approach was necessary to excavate underlying factors that influence political communication in the (digital) public sphere. The purpose of using the connective approach was to understand the extent to which online political participation influences offline political activities such as voting.

The findings show that Twitter's contribution to democratisation in Nigeria is not autonomous. Rather, it is inter-dependent on other long-standing factors, such as societal culture and economic power. This finding supports the initial thesis of the study. It argues that Twitter fulfils a distinctive purpose of the public sphere in that it creates a space for critical reasoning that facilitates political change. While this constitutes its elitist status, however, it also makes the microblog a more valuable medium for political discourse than other social media platforms.

The evidence also shows that Twitter offers anonymity, which safeguards users from facing repercussions because of their political views. This is a useful finding in present-day Nigerian society where the government imposes punitive measures on online and offline dissidence. Furthermore, observations of the communication patterns of the three major ethnic groups in the country showed that ethnicity as culture exerts a significant influence on the communication patterns of Nigerians, both online and offline. These findings contribute to the methodological broadening of Twitter-based studies.

In conclusion, the current study supports the call by non-Western researchers for the contextualisation of social media and political studies within societies as opposed to the common superimposition of findings from Western studies to non-Western contexts. Furthermore, it calls for further research that utilises a comparative approach to explore commonalities and evaluate contrasts by applying diverse cultural lenses. It also proposes that a similar study should be undertaken on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, whose userbases are more representative of the Nigerian population. Finally, a mixed-methods study could excavate other themes that influence political participation that have not been explored here.